

“Aestheticism,” *The Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, DT), 2 Feb. 1882, 1¹

Oscar Wilde, the Aesthetic Guy,² Interviewed by a Herald Yearner After the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

A Too Awfully, Utterly Utter Lecture and a Sick Audience—Disgusted Washingtonians.

LILIES AND SUNFLOWERS.

Special Correspondence to the Herald.

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26.—The boss aestheticker, Oscar Wilde, is in the city, doing his best to induce the sublimely rapturous class to make him the fashion. He is succeeding. The commercial value of his success is \$1,000 per night and expenses, with a number of presents and mashes on susceptible misses of poor taste thrown in as side dishes.³ He is stopping at the Arlington. He heard the Dakota gang were there and if it was good enough for them, he concluded it would do for him. As soon as the HERALD innocent learned that his lily-adoring nibs was under the same roof, he determined on an interview or blood, with the odds in favor of the latter. Oscar didn't take his meals with the common herd, much to the herd's satisfaction, but lays away his buckwheat cakes, fried liver, sausage and limburger in the privacy of his own apartments,⁴ hence it was impossible to waylay him in the halls and corridors. After several false starts access was gained to his rooms. The general outfit was not particularly exhilarating as far as appearances went. The room was cluttered up with a lot of truck of the aesthetic order. He had a number of photographs stuck around, among which were not a few of himself. In one picture he was humped up like a burnt boot, in a way which was suggestive of an attack of the colic;⁵ in another he appeared to be attempting to scratch his back, and looked as if the strain was something too utterly utt[er].⁶ The postures in all the photographs would be calculated to make the india-rubber man in the side-show disgusted with the profession.⁷ In all he looked as if his food didn't agree with him.

1. Grand Forks was then in Dakota Territory; it is now in North Dakota. There are some similarities between this article and “Mr. Oscar Wilde,” *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), 21 Jan. 1882, 1 (*Oscar Wilde: The Complete Interviews*, pp. 94–6), which may imply that the interviews were conducted simultaneously or that the *Herald* article is cribbed from the *Star*. Unique elements in this article argue against the *Herald* being the source.

2. “Guy”: fool.

3. “Mashes”: romantic crushes or infatuations.

4. Limburger is a Belgian cheese.

5. In Napoleon Sarony's plate nos. 7, 8, 9A, 9B, 18 and 22 Wilde sits leaning forward with his left elbow on his knee and his chin on his palm.

6. In Sarony's plate no. 14 Wilde stands with both hands behind his back.

7. “India-rubber man”: contortionist.

And now for the exponent of the aesthetic idea himself.

He was posing on a lounge, over which was thrown a buffalo robe, that he must have borrowed from some livery stable. He languidly arose as the HERALD representative entered, and gave an aesthetic though mild welcome, and then relapsed into his attitudinizing again. He arranged one aesthetic leg over the length of the lounge and dangled the other aesthetic member over the edge. He rested his aesthetic, though dirty-looking mop of hair, on one aesthetic hand and made languidly aesthetic gestures with the other.¹

He lay there, six feet and a half long, and just as lazy as he was long. As soon as the HERALD man had sized up the aestheticism of the situation, he answered the aesthete's enquiringly aesthetic gaze with:

"Well, Mr. Wilde, how does she boom[?]"

"I beg pawdon."

"Oh, your [*sic*] pardonable. How are things anyway? How's art? How does the Renaissance progress?"

"Oh, you enquire about the progress of my work; yes I understand, I understand." He paused and combed his long hair with his fingers. "I am doing all I possibly can," he continued, "to encourage the cultivation of true taste. In England the 'esthetic craze,' as it is demonstrated,² is spreading throughout all classes of those interested in art. It is not confined to any select circle but pervades all. It is reaching almost national importance in its growth."

"Do the Yankees catch on?"

"Catch what, sir? I fail to comprehend your meaning."

"How do you find it over here[?] Do the American sovereigns bite? Do the people here let you feed them on your sunflower business and take it with proper docility, and never kick?"

"If you mean the state of aestheticism in America I can say it is very encouraging. There is much more true art here than I supposed, and you know true art is aestheticism.³ I am daily in receipt of inquiries which indicate a vast and growing interest in true taste, and I do all I can to spread and encourage it.⁴ I am trying to make the people here love art, and embody art in all they think or do. My object is to spread the truth in regard to art and help the people to form correct ideas of the proper relations of art to life and life to art. I also endeavor to elevate the standard and make a standard where there is none."

"You dress and act with that end in view?"

1. *The Evening Star* also refers to a "buffalo robe" and describes Wilde resting his head on one hand while making gestures with the other (p. 96).

2. "Demonstrated" is an unusual word in this context. The interviewer possibly misheard "designated".

3. *The Evening Star*: "'There is,' he said, 'much more true art here than I supposed; and true art, you know, is estheticism.'" (p. 94.)

4. *The Evening Star*: "I am doing all I can to encourage the spread of true taste." (p. 94.)

"Mainly; I believe in individuality. I believe in having different standards, all high, but to conform to the circumstances. The standard here should not be identical with that of England because the conditions of life are different."¹

"Is your giddy attire donned as an advertising joke or do you believe it the proper thing?"

He forgot his pose, and his Irish came to the front at that. He answered rather severely.

"My 'giddy attire,' as you are pleased to term it, is strictly in accordance with my canons of taste. I believe a gentleman may and should wear harmonious colors, and has the same right to do so that a lady has."

"How about the baseball pantaloons, are they aesthetic?"

"What you call my baseball pantaloons are the culmination of artistic ideas in that article of wearing apparel. Whenever the art of dress reached its highest point, then knee breeches were in vogue. They are certainly more comfortable and display a fine form more advantageously than would pantaloons reaching to the ground. When men came to disregard dress the present uncourtly, ungraceful style was adopted."

"Are you married, Mr. Wilde? Got a family?"

"No."

"Suppose it isn't aesthetic to raise children?"

"That is a phase of the question I haven't considered."

"Will you go West, Mr. Wilde?"

"I will endeavor to see as large a part of your country as possible and intend taking a run out on the Central Pacific.² I want to spend some time in the South, and may go into the Northwest when spring arrives.³ I am anxious to witness an American spring. I intend spending some time in Canada.⁴ As for my lecturing appointments I am entirely in the hands of my agent, Mr. Carte."

"When you go West take a run into Dakota, Mr. Wilde. You can take a claim and when the lecture business plays out, you can go to raising sunflowers to supply the demand you are creating."⁵ He was thankful for the advice.

"Good day, Mr. Wilde."

"Au revoir."

✂ *An account of Wilde's lecture in Washington, D.C.*

1. *The Evening Star*: "There is an individuality of art for every people. The Americans should not copy the decorations of England." (p. 94.)

2. The Central Pacific Railroad ran from Ogden, Utah, to Oakland, California. Wilde would travel to California on this railroad, having first taken the Union Pacific Railroad from Omaha, Nebraska, to Ogden.

3. *The Evening Star*: "I intend to visit New Orleans." (p. 96.) Wilde would not visit the Northwest.

4. *The Evening Star*: "I want to see a spring in this country" (p. 96). This is the earliest known mention of a visit to Canada in Wilde's interviews.

5. From the mid-1870s many large "bonanza farms" were established in Dakota Territory. Most produced wheat.